



BIOGRAPHY

William Averell Harriman as foreign policy advisor, shown here meeting Gen. Douglas MacArthur, urged President Truman to assert his leadership and drafted MacArthur's dismissal announcement.



William Averell Harriman (1891-1986)

W. Averell Harriman was an influential U.S. diplomat and foreign policy advisor. Born on Nov. 15, 1891, in New York, Harriman was the son of railroad magnate E. H. Harriman. He graduated from Groton preparatory school in 1908 and from Yale University in 1913. Harriman inherited his father's massive fortune and in 1916 bought a shipyard. From 1917 to 1925, as head of the Merchant Shipping Corporation, he controlled one of the largest merchant fleets in the world.

In the 1930s Harriman served President Franklin Roosevelt in various capacities with the National Recovery Administration, the Business Advisory Council of the Department of Commerce, and the Office of Production Management. In the latter capacity, Harriman was chief of the raw materials branch and, as Roosevelt's special envoy, coordinated Lend-Lease aid to Britain and the USSR from 1941 to 1943. In 1943 Roosevelt appointed him U.S. ambassador to Moscow.

Harriman served President Harry S. Truman in turn as secretary of commerce (1946–1948), director of economic aid to Europe under the Marshall Plan (1948–1950), and U.S. representative on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) commission studying Western defenses in 1951.

When the Korean War began in June 1950, Harriman arranged his early return from Europe with a phone call to Truman, informing the president that Europeans were “gravely concerned lest we fail to meet the challenge in Europe.” Harriman took up residence in the Executive Office Building, a blow to his ego because he fully expected to be at Truman's side as a special assistant to the president for

national security affairs and with his own staff.

Harriman's principal task was to keep Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson and Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson from coming to blows, but he persuaded Truman to let him join a delegation led by Deputy Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Matthew Ridgway to Tokyo to confer with General Douglas MacArthur. Harriman's role was to assure MacArthur that Truman was trying to meet his troop requirements, while impressing on him the administration's concern that committing too many divisions in Asia would leave Europe vulnerable to Soviet attack, and to impress on MacArthur that Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) must not be encouraged to initiate a war with the People's Republic of China (PRC, Communist China). Harriman returned to Washington a supporter of MacArthur's bold plan for an amphibious operation at Inch'on and with the general's assurance that neither the Chinese nor Russians would intervene in Korea.

Harriman played an important role when the war turned against the United Nations (U.N.) forces after the massive PRC military intervention. At a crucial National Security Council meeting on Nov. 28, 1950, Harriman challenged Truman to assert his leadership. Truman responded by accelerating NSC-68, "United States Objectives and Programs for National Security," recommendations for vastly expanding U.S. defense spending and rearmament. Harriman, along with Secretaries Acheson and Johnson, influenced Truman's decision to direct MacArthur to issue a disclaimer of views he had expressed with regard to Nationalist China in an August 1950 speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. MacArthur had done so despite a pledge to Harriman in their Tokyo meeting that he would refrain from making statements that might be misconstrued as Truman administration policy. In October, after the successful Inch'on landing, Harriman, political advisor Charles Murphy and Truman flew to Wake Island for a face-to-face meeting with MacArthur. Harriman believed the hour and a half meeting largely resolved misunderstandings between the president and his field commander. Harriman also played a prominent role in Truman's decision to fire Secretary of Defense Johnson.

Johnson mistakenly believed Harriman sided with him in his differences with Acheson, but, as it turned out, Harriman reported to Truman Johnson's effort to enlist his assistance to secure Acheson's dismissal. Harriman greatly admired Johnson's successor, General of the Army George C. Marshall.

2

Harriman was the author of the presidential order aimed at curbing MacArthur's public criticism of the Truman administration's war policies by requiring all policy statements to be approved in advance by the administration. MacArthur's subsequent letter to Republican House Minority Leader Joseph Martin, made public on April 5, 1951, led to Truman's meeting with Harriman, Acheson, Marshall and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Omar Bradley. Harriman advised that MacArthur be fired immediately, but Truman hesitated. After further consultation Truman agreed, and Harriman drafted the dismissal announcement. This concluded Harriman's role in the Korean War.

Truman soon sent Harriman on a special mission to Iran. He then became the primary link between Truman and newly appointed Supreme Commander of NATO General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Harriman's work with NATO led to his 1951 appointment to head the newly created Mutual Security Administration, a post he held until 1953. In 1954 he was elected governor of New York, but was defeated for reelection in 1958 by Nelson A. Rockefeller.

In 1961 President John F. Kennedy appointed Harriman undersecretary of state for Far Eastern Affairs, the number-three position at the State Department. In this capacity Harriman negotiated several key agreements, including the 1962 Laos Accords. He actively sought the removal of Republic of Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem and helped draft the telegram to U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge that implied U.S. support for a coup against him.

Harriman was not close to President Lyndon B. Johnson. In March 1964 he was given charge of African affairs at the Department of State; the next year he was appointed ambassador at large. Although he publicly supported the president's Vietnam policies, privately Harriman worked to change them, especially in the matter of negotiating with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In 1968 Johnson appointed Harriman as the U.S. representative at the Paris Peace Talks. He retired from public life with the election of President Richard Nixon in 1969 and died in New York on July 26, 1986.

—Claude R. Sasso

Sources

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